

“CHRISTMAS CAROLS: V - GOD’S SONG!”

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Elkton United Methodist Church

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Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Every year, sometime in late October or early November, Kay, the church secretary, and I, sit down and make a chart of everything we have to have done before Christmas, and we make a schedule to get it done. From newsletter articles, to Sunday bulletins, to Advent wreath inserts, to Christmas Eve bulletins. We lay it all out, and make a schedule, so that by the time we arrive at this night, we haven’t gone off the deep end and pulled all our hair out!

I’ll bet some of you do the same thing - oh not plan out newsletters and bulletins, but I’ll bet some of you, along about late October or early November, start making lists - laying out everything you need to do before Christmas Eve. I do it at home too. I write down everything that needs to get done, and all the dates of all the events that are going on. Then I can look at the whole thing and plan my days and weeks, for that matter.

So back in late October, I knew that in the second and third weeks of December, I’d be having two different groups over to the parsonage for dinner. On Friday, the 11th, it would be the church staff, and on Tuesday, the 15th, my Beginnings group. Knowing that, I had to make sure that I had all my decorating done before the 11th of December.

So a few days before that (with the help of some family members) I got all the boxes out and started decorating, which includes putting up two Christmas trees - one in the living room and the other in the family room. I have this gigantic tree in the living room - 7 feet tall - that’s the one you can see if you come down High Street and look at the side window. It’s there mostly for ambience.

The other tree, the one in the family room, I call my tree. It’s smaller, and it’s filled with my personal ornaments, collected from all over the world. When I take the time to sit and look at it, every ornament reminds me of someplace to which I have traveled, it holds a precious memory.

So, that week, I set about assembling and decorating those two trees. It wasn’t easy getting that seven foot tree together, but I did it (not without a little fussing and fuming), but I did it. Then I went to the family room and put the

smaller tree together - much easier. Plugged it in - lights worked - eureka. So then, with a little help from my nephew Damien, we put on the ornaments.

Just when we got to the last few ornaments, we touched one of the branches, and the whole entire center of the tree went dark. You know what that's like when it happens - how irritating is that! I don't care what they say - you can't figure out which little bulb is the problem, so after jiggling a bunch of them, I just gave up and walked away. A couple days later, after jiggling and jiggling and jiggling, I gave up, went to the store, paid \$1.99 for a string of white lights, threw them on the tree in the dark area, and voila, nobody was the wiser - it was spectacular! I sat and reveled in the glow of the tree that evening.

Next morning, I got up, went downstairs, made my cup of coffee, went over to the tree to start my day off in the glow of the twinkling lights, plugged it in, turned around - to find the top two thirds of the tree totally dark! (I don't want to tell you the unkind words that came out of my mouth!)

I'll tell you though, that if I hadn't been having two groups over for dinner just a few days after that, my family room might be tree free right now! Alas, though, I was, so in quite the huff, I got in my car, drove over to Walmart, plunked down \$35 whole dollars for a new tree (I figure I can get a good one for half price after Christmas) took it home, de-decorated the old one, threw it away, put up the new one, decorated it, and it is adorning my family room at this very moment!

By the way, once I finished decorating it and was so pleased with the results, I strode back into the living room to happily bask in its glow, and found, yep, you guessed it, the whole bottom row of that tree absolutely, positively pitch dark. Ah, Christmas!

You know, there are some things that just make Christmas Christmas. That's one of them - decorating - tree trimming, fighting with lights, running to stores. Then there's baking cookies, giving and receiving gifts, enjoying family dinners, sharing hugs and kisses, and of course, coming to church. Whether or not you come to church any other time during the year, whether you're a regular attender or come only on Christmas and Easter - it doesn't matter, tonight is special. It makes Christmas Christmas.

Bells ringing, choirs singing, the word, that wonderful word from Luke that we could all probably say by heart is read, candlelight is passed from person to person and that wonderful glow moves so majestically across the ceiling! It makes Christmas Christmas.

Some of you have come tonight because it's just what you do every year.

Some of you have come because you yearn to hear about peace on earth in the midst of a world that seems so bent on waging war. Some of you have come because you need a Savior right now, you're weighed down and need to be lifted up. And some of you have come because you need to hear a word of hope, and hope is the word of Christmas!

For whatever reason you have come, be of good cheer, for as one person so beautifully put it, "Love is in this room tonight!"(On-line, Rev. Claire Clyburn) That's God's Song - Love, a love so strong and powerful, a love so overwhelming for you and me, that He sent His Son into the world for us and our salvation. In that little town of Bethlehem, into the arms of Mary and Joseph, to the glorious singing of angels, the wide-eyed wonder of shepherds, and the gift-filled arms of the wise men - love came down at Christmas in Jesus the Christ.

You know, we throw that word love around a lot. It means different things to different people. Researchers once sat down with a group of 4 to 8 year olds and asked them what love means. Here is some of what they said:

"Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs."

"Love is what makes you smile even when you're tired."

"Love is when your puppy licks your face event after you left him alone all day."

"Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."

"When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you're not scared they won't love you anymore. But then you get surprised because not only do they still love you, they love you even more."

And then this - "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." (Ibid)

Oh, out of the mouths of babes! And you know what, when it comes right down to it, all of those kinds of love are possible, because we have first been loved by God in Christ Jesus! We love, because first, we have been loved.

Which leads me to tell you about a child named Roger - Roger Kiser. Roger was living in an orphanage, and one year, several days before Christmas he and all the other children were taken by bus to a local hotel to attend a Christmas party

being put on for underprivileged children. They had a wonderful meal together, then they watched a Christmas play on the stage in front of them, and then the lights were dimmed and everyone got quiet. Then suddenly the lights came up, and there he was, Santa Claus! The kids went wild, except for the children from the orphanage. Mrs. Winters, the matron, had warned them to be on their best behavior, and she was sitting right there with them, so they did as they had been told.

Soon the children were being led up onto the stage so that each child could receive a gift from Santa. Roger waited patiently, all the while praying that he would get a big gift, one of them that he saw sitting next to Santa. As the line got shorter and shorter, Roger saw Santa look right at him. He winked at him and when Roger got to him, Santa leaned over, got one of those big boxes and handed it to him. As Roger leaned over to take the box he tripped and fell to his knees. Santa reached over to help him up.

“Move it along, Kiser,” Mrs. Winters yelled. But Roger had something else in mind. He was so close to Santa, and he whispered to him, “Can I hug you Santa?” The next thing he knew Mrs. Winters had him by the scruff of his neck and was pulling him out of line. Santa stood up and said, “Please, please, ma’am. These are little children.”

Mrs. Winters never looked back. She just kept walking and pushing Roger back down the stairs, back into his seat at the table, and the poor little thing sat there crying, looking up onto the stage to see if his present was still there.

Soon enough the party was over, and the kids were rounded up to get back on the bus, and as Roger stood in line, suddenly he heard ‘Ho, Ho, Ho’ coming from behind him. He turned around and there stood Santa Claus holding his present. He put the box down on the ground next to Roger and knelt down beside him and hugged him as hard as he could.

You know what Roger said to him? “Am I a children?”

“You’re a good children,” Santa replied. And when Roger looked at Santa’s face, he saw that Santa himself had been crying. (On-line, Sermonillustrator.org, Roger Kiser, Sr.)

That’s love, my friends. That’s the kind of love we celebrate tonight. That’s the kind of love God sent down at Christmas. A love that gives, that lives our life, knows our struggles, and comes to take them away. A love that says “you are precious, you are beloved, just as you are.” That’s the love of Jesus, the love of the baby of Bethlehem, whose birth we celebrate this night.

It's the kind of love that a pastor saw in living color one night in a hospital. She was going to make a visit to a parishioner and as she entered the hospital, she passed a man who looked to be in his early 30's. She noticed him because he was so young, yet, as she put it, "bald as a billiard ball." Now, she'd been around that hospital long enough to recognize what that meant. He was walking toward the cancer center, so she knew that he was probably in the midst of chemotherapy and he was on his way to treatment or to see a doctor.

As she looked at him, she said a silent prayer for one so young stricken with such a horrid disease. And then soon enough he turned one way and she turned another.

A little while later, after having visited her parishioner, the pastor was on her way out of the hospital, and she ran into the man again. Only this time he wasn't alone. Sitting up on his shoulders was a little boy in a Winnie the Pooh bathrobe, and then she knew by looking at him and his little bald head, that it was he who had cancer, not the dad. And she also knew in that instant that that man, that little boy's father, had shaved his head not because he had cancer, but out of love for his little boy. (On-line, Clyburn)

That's love, that's the kind of love we celebrate tonight, the love that came down at Christmas, the love that will do anything and everything for us, that walks with us through pain and suffering, and that rejoices with us in times of happiness and joy.

I don't know about you, but that kind of love overwhelms me. That kind of love reminds me each and every day that no matter what that day brings, it's going to be okay, I am not alone, God in Christ is with me, and all will be well, no matter what.

So tonight is a night of joy - wonderful, wonderful joy. For we have been loved by God Himself in the most perfect way possible - He came into the world to be with us forever and ever. Because of Christmas, we are never alone.

So I close on this magical night with the wonderful words of poet Ann Weems who says this:

"Each year about this time I try to be sophisticated and pretend I understand the bored expressions relating to 'the Christmas spirit.'
I nod when they say, 'Put the Christ back in Christmas.'
I say, 'Yes, yes, yes,' when they shout, 'commercial' and 'hectic, hectic, hectic.'
After all, I'm getting older and I've heard it said, 'Christmas is for children.'

But somehow a fa-la-la keeps creeping out.
So I'll say it:
I love Christmas tinsel and angel voices that come from the beds upstairs.

And I say three cheers for Santa Claus
and the Salvation Army bucket
and all the wrappings and festivities and special warm feelings.

I say it is good - giving, praising, celebrating.

So hooray for Christmas trees and candlelight
and the good old church pageant.
Hooray for shepherd boys who forget their lines
and Wise Men whose beards fall off and a Mary who giggles.
O Lord, you were born!

O Lord, you were born!
And that breaks in upon my ordered life like bugles blaring,
and I sing, 'Hark, the Herald Angels' in the most unlikely places.
You were born and I will celebrate!

I rejoice for the carnival of Christmas!
I clap for the pajama-clad cherubs and the Christmas cards jammed
in the mail slot.
I oooh for the turkey and aaaah for the Christmas pudding
and thank God for the alleluias I see in the faces of people I don't know
and yet know very well.

O Lord, there just aren't enough choirboys to sing what I feel.
There aren't enough trumpets to blow.
O Lord, I want bells to peal!
I want to dance in the streets of Bethlehem!
I want to sing with the heavenly host!
For unto us a Son was given, and he was called God with us.
For those of us who believe, the whole world is decorated in love!
(Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, "O Lord, You Were Born," p. 28)

Amen, Ann Weems! For those of us who believe, the whole world is decorated
in love! And love is in this room tonight!

God has sung His song - and His song is love, and His song is Jesus! Thanks
be to God! Alleluia!

Amen.